Tomás Talamantes, Benjamin D. Wilson, and the Breakup of Rancho La Ballona on January 2, 1857

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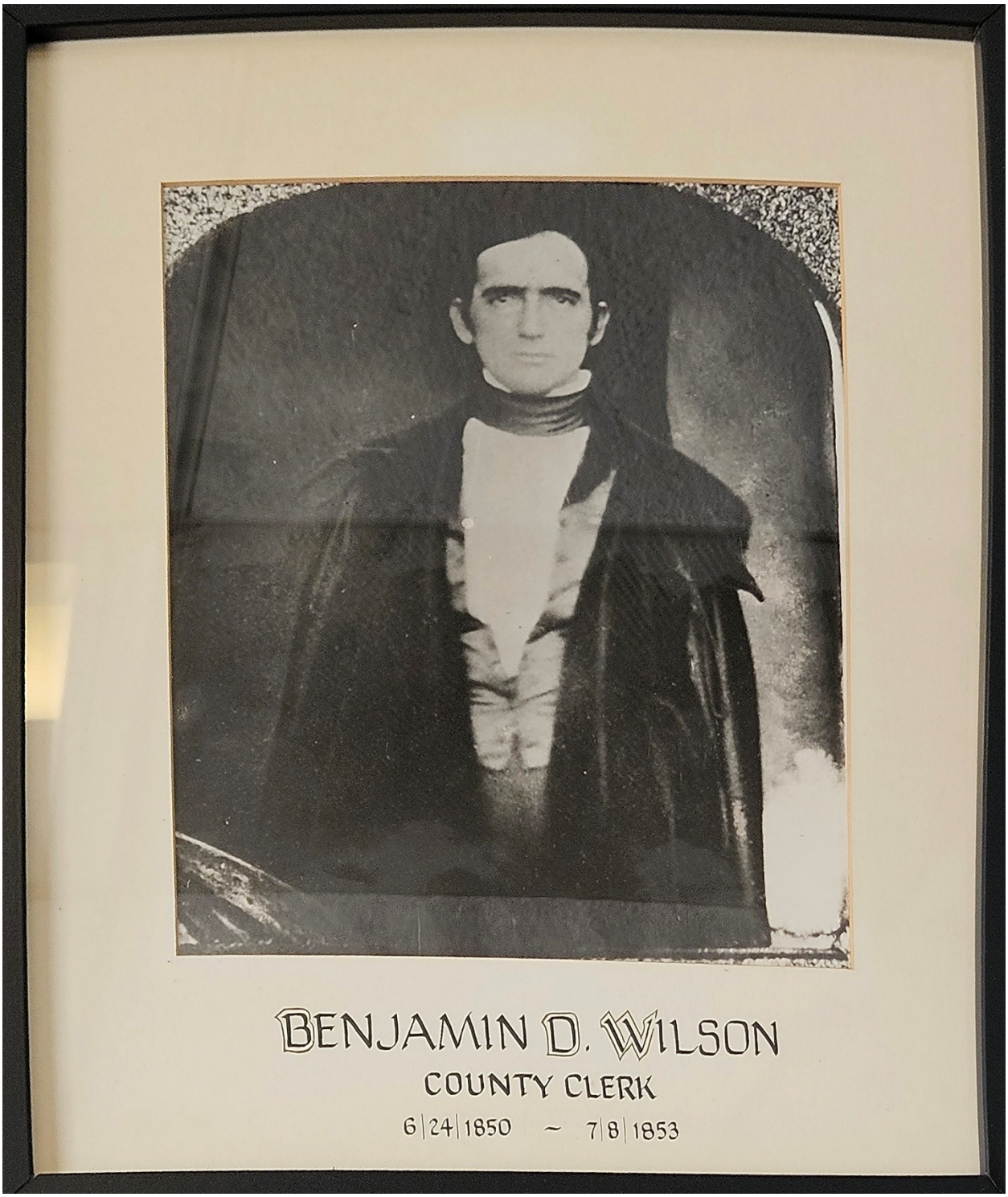

The financial difficulties of Tomás Talamantes, one of the four original grantees of Rancho La Ballona, became the opening event in the eventual breakup and partition of the Rancho. The 13,920-acre grant had been confirmed in 1839 by Alta California Governor Juan Bautista Alvarado to Agustín Machado, Ygnacio Machado, Felipe Talamantes, and Tomás Talamantes — successors to a 1819 Spanish grazing concession the family had held since 1821 — whose interests remained undivided rather than physically separated into four individual tracts.

On June 14, 1854, Tomás Talamantes borrowed $1,500 from Benjamin D. Wilson and William T. B. Sanford, securing the loan with a mortgage on his undivided one-quarter interest in Rancho La Ballona. The note ran for six months at interest of five percent per month. Talamantes defaulted. By the time Wilson and Sanford obtained judgment, the debt had grown to $2,353.26 in principal and interest plus $238.81 in costs; a writ of execution issued December 6, 1855 recorded accrued interest of $1,690.28.

On the morning of December 31, 1855, Sheriff Alexander conducted a public auction in front of the Los Angeles courthouse. Benjamin D. Wilson's bid of $2,000 prevailed, netting him the equivalent of 3,480 acres — one-quarter of the 13,920-acre grant. A sheriff's deed was issued to Wilson on January 2, 1857, transferring Tomás Talamantes's undivided one-quarter interest to Wilson. Wilson thereby became an owner in common with the remaining Machado and Talamantes interests; he did not acquire a geographically defined quarter-section of the Rancho — physical partition did not occur until 1868.

Benjamin Davis “Don Benito” Wilson (1811–1878) was already one of the most prominent figures in early American Los Angeles at the time of this transaction. Tennessee-born, he arrived in California in 1841 with the Workman–Rowland Party, originally bound for China, and became the first permanent American settler in the Riverside area after acquiring a portion of Rancho Jurupa in 1842. Following California statehood, Wilson was elected to the Los Angeles Common Council in 1850 and, separately, was elected the first Los Angeles County Clerk that same year — though he reportedly delegated the office's actual work to a deputy, Wilson W. Jones, while retaining the title and its emoluments. In 1851 Wilson was elected the second mayor of Los Angeles under U.S. statehood (serving May 7, 1851 – May 4, 1852), succeeding Alpheus P. Hodges — not the first, as some popular accounts loosely state. He went on to serve as a federal Indian agent, Los Angeles County supervisor (1853, 1861–64), and California state senator for three terms.

This chronology matters for the Ballona record: Wilson was not a later outside purchaser but a man who, immediately before the 1854 Talamantes mortgage and its 1855–57 foreclosure sequence, was actively occupying the newly formed American county and city governmental apparatus in Los Angeles. His acquisition of Talamantes's interest sits squarely within the transition of Southern California landholding from the Mexican rancho system into the American system of mortgages, judgments, writs of execution, and judicial partition.

Wilson did not retain his Ballona interest long. In 1859 he sold his undivided quarter interest — sources differ slightly on the buyer list. One local-history account names John Sanford, James T. Young, and John D. Young as purchasers, for $4,500; another summary names only George A. Sanford and John D. Young. The 1859 buyers — whichever combination is correct — later petitioned in 1863 for division of the lower Ballona Valley, resulting in the 1868 partition decree splitting the Rancho into 23 sections. The parallel disintegration of the other three quarters — Felipe Talamantes's death in 1856 leaving twenty-five heirs, and subsequent Machado-side transfers — compounded the fragmentation that made 1868 partition necessary.

Wilson's significance extends well beyond Ballona. He established Lake Vineyard, his own ranch and winery near present-day San Gabriel, and later came into possession of adjoining Rancho San Pascual (today's Pasadena) through a 1859 loan to owner Manuel Garfias and a subsequent 1863 purchase with Dr. John Strother Griffin. In 1864, Wilson led an expedition into the San Gabriel Mountains specifically seeking timber suitable for wine vats for his viticultural operations; the burro trail his party cut — using hired Mexican and Indigenous laborers to improve an existing indigenous path up Little Santa Anita Canyon — became known as the Wilson Trail, and the summit it reached was later named Mount Wilson in his honor. Notably, the timber he found there proved unsuitable for his original purpose.

The connection is historically apt: the same Benjamin D. Wilson who foreclosed on Tomás Talamantes's undivided quarter interest in Rancho La Ballona was the county's first clerk, its second American-era mayor, and the namesake of Mount Wilson — later home to the Mount Wilson Observatory. His appearance in the Ballona record situates the Talamantes financial failure within the broader institutional transformation of Los Angeles during the first decade of American rule.